

# Patient language - Evaluating its relationship to a clinical thesaurus

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*The expression of clinical concepts in language patients use is of great potential use in both the recording and use of information. Sections of the Read Thesaurus have been examined and terms extracted from shared records and health promotional material to see how well client language is supported.*

## INTRODUCTION

The recognition of patient language and its relationship to a clinical thesaurus is important in a number of clinical scenarios:

- A terminology designed to support clinical records can only accurately record presenting problems if patients natural language is supported
- Healthcare management increasingly utilises shared records empowering the patient to hold, and be responsible for their record
- The patient has a need to understand and validate their record contents
- It is desirable to share a common terminology with supportive health promotion material

There are therefore compelling reasons to assess the efficacy to which a clinical vocabulary might support a client based terminology.

## METHODOLOGY

The Read Thesaurus<sup>1</sup> is a user-led terminology collected and supported by a wide range of professionally led working groups. One of these groups' (the Client Representative Group), objectives was to scope the extent to which a clinically collected terminology might support client language. The evaluation consisted of examining refined sections of the thesaurus, and also assessing whether terms collected from a variety of client held records (e.g. Antenatal) and health educational material were available within the thesaurus.

## RESULTS

The scoping study identified a number of important differences between clinical and client based sublanguages:

- Clinical terms were by necessity sometimes complex and not easily amenable to being represented in client language without a full definition
- Hierarchy placement was beneficial in orientating a client (e.g. Crohn's disease could be identified as a type of inflammatory bowel disease)
- Client language has greater variability in meaning (e.g. "chronic" is sometimes used to mean "acute")
- Client language often uses terms to represent concepts to which they are strictly a superordinate (e.g. Heart attack is a frequently used "synonym" of myocardial infarction)
- Client language is often embroidered with dialect which can be regional (e.g. A wood splinter in some regions is referred to as a "spelk"); and some subcultures use highly individualistic colloquial terms (e.g. street names for substances of abuse)

## DISCUSSION

Experience with the development of terminologies with clinicians has highlighted the differences in opinion both between and within different healthcare professional groups on the meaning implied by the use of some words. For example the use of the term "mobilisation" invokes a different meaning for orthopaedic surgeons, physiotherapists and nurses. Communication and the common focus of patient care between these professionals, however, ensures largely a transferable set of beliefs. Client language does not have a similar focus and inevitably terms are more likely to be used in less rigorous ways.

These differences suggest that a practical first step in improving the utility of a clinical thesaurus to support client terminology is to concentrate on those concepts frequently used in shared records and educational material where there is more established agreement of meaning.

## References

1. O'Neil MJ, Payne C, Read JD. Read Codes Version 3: A User Led Terminology. *Meth Inform Med* 1995; 34: 187-192.